# The Fourth Church Pulpit

## KEEP THE FAITH

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John M. Buchanan

God is the one whom we meet, even though perhaps without naming ... when we dare to be foolish, when we love without the initial certainty of being loved in return. When we remain true to our convictions even to our disadvantage ... what shall we do? ... the answer comes and holds us just where we are, living quite ordinarily; where we are, carrying on patiently. It is precisely here that we can experience the kingdom of God ... if only we want to, and if only we can surrender in hope to the hidden meaning and innermost power of this everyday life of ours.

Karl Rahner
*Meditations on Love and Hope*

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Scripture

**"Be persistent, whether the time is favorable or unfavorable."**
II Timothy 4:2 (NRSV)

On Monday morning I sat by the television watching the funeral of Yitzhak Rabin as world leaders gathered around a simple grave site, to hear ancient words and prayers, and to think deeply about the human condition, the human prospect and his life. He was an admirable man and there were many admirable things said about him. Many of them had to do with the fact that for 50 years, as a soldier, a general, a politician, a father, a peacemaker, Mr. Rabin had kept faith persistently with his people, his family, his conscience.

In the over-heated political climate of his own nation, beset now with violent rhetoric and violent activity from within its own radical right, Mr. Rabin kept moving steadily, persistently forward toward the goal of peace.

As I listened to the eulogy I kept thinking about the texts we would be hearing in worship this morning ...

The story Jesus told one time about a wonderfully persistent woman who will not give up her pursuit of justice.

And St. Paul's good advice to young Timothy:

> "be persistent, whether the time is favorable or unfavorable."

And I thought about a verse from the Psalm we just read:

> "God is mindful of his covenant forever of the word that he commanded for a thousand generations."

Persistence ... God's faithfulness — and faith's persistence, two old and important concepts which, in a sense, are one dynamic.

A group of us were in Jerusalem, a month and a half ago, in fact at the very time Mr. Rabin was at the White House signing the Oslo II Agreement. On our first morning in Jerusalem we visited the site of the Temple, built by King Herod the Great, the Temple Jesus himself visited. On the site now stands two important Islamic buildings: a Mosque and the Dome of the Rock. All that is left of the Jewish Temple is the Western Wall — actually not the Temple Wall at all, but a portion of one wall of the foundation on which the older structure was built. In 70 A.D. the Romans were so utterly infuriated with the Jews that all the might and violence and power of the Empire was devoted to eradicating the people, their religion, and their home forever. And the Temple, the heart of the people and their faith, was leveled — not one stone left standing on another, all the way down to the foundation.

We visited the site on Rosh Hashanah, nearly 2,000 years after the destruction of the Temple. And there they were, great crowds of Jewish people: men and boys, many of them Orthodox, gathered in smaller clusters, around a rabbi — chanting, praying, swaying. And on the other side of a small divider women and girls, Jews and Christians, come to pray at the Wall. Their voices joined sounds to some like wailing, but it is not wailing and it is not appropriate to call it that. What it is, is praying; persistent praying — praying like Paul commanded to Timothy — in favorable times and unfavorable times: common praying, ordinary people praying, common prayers ... for world peace, but also peace in my family; for the prime minister's health and for my granddaughter; for justice between races and also that my job is not abolished; for deliverance from fear of nuclear holocaust but also deliverance from my own fears. The custom is to write a prayer or a name or a thought on a piece of paper, roll it up, and place in a crack between the stones — which the Romans failed to destroy.

It was a deeply moving experience. Yet I found myself smiling as I wrote a name and placed it in the wall and prayed my prayer, thinking about what the Romans would think; so full of themselves with their armor and chariots and awesome military power — what the Romans would think if they could see what was still going on at the Western Wall of the Temple they thought they had utterly destroyed almost 2,000 years ago.

God's faithfulness — and faith's persistence.

When Jesus told that story about the widow, who because of her relentless persistence finally receives a hearing, he was addressing a group of friends who were worried. Some were worried about their own safety. They were going out into an uncaring and increasingly hostile world with a new message. But others must have been worried because they weren't going anywhere. Some weren't going to express their faith by becoming preachers. They were going home to Galilee to fish, farm, live with their families. Some of them were going to stay home and keep on keeping on. Be persistent Jesus told them. And I've always thought he meant them particularly. Keep the faith — doing the things you always do, in the ordinary life of your own ordinary world.

Ordinary life, where most of us live most of our lives, can wear us down with its sameness and routine and monotony. We all know people who live with a kind of low grade boredom with their own lives; day after day, week after week, month after month, year after year of pretty much the same thing, and life itself seems to be diminishing, not only in terms of time left, but the dimension of time now, of our horizons and skies, of diminishing dreams and smaller mountains to climb. I suspect there are not many of us here who have not experienced something of that in the ordinariness of our own lives whatever they happen to be.

The late Karl Rahner, (a wonderful German Catholic theologian) wrote an essay on the subject one time in which he made the wise and helpful observation that: "Everyday life as it is already asks a lot of (us) ... To keep on through dull, tedious, everyday existence can often be more difficult than a unique (and heroic) deed ..." [*Meditations on Love and Hope*, p. 23]

The admonition simply to be persistent in our own faith, our own lives, would be Pollyannish, if it weren't for the reality that ordinary life, ordinary tasks and responsibilities, from a particular angle of vision, are not ordinary at all.

Good writers are able to see through and beyond ordinary objects, events ... to deeper reality. Eugene Peterson who writes from a faith perspective says: "There is a certain kind of genius, in the ability and energy to keep returning to the same task relentlessly, imaginatively, curiously, for a life time."

Augustine, Peterson says, wrote 15 different commentaries on the book of Genesis and never thought he got it right. Beethoven was intrigued with the string quartet form and wrote 16 of them, never satisfied that he had mastered the form. [See *Weavings*, July/Aug. '94]

Annie Dillard makes the same point about her writing craft. It takes a long time and a lot of work to write a good book and although there are some exceptions, most writers keep at it every day, day after day, page after page. Thomas Mann, she says was a "prodigy of production, working full-time, he wrote a page a day, every day, 365 pages a year, every year." *[The Writing Life*, p. 26]

Monet painted grain stacks, the Cathedral at Rouen, and, of course, his beloved water lilies, over and over again, persistently, at different times of day, different seasons, never satisfied.

But, hold on. This is sounding like your basic motivational speech, not a sermon. Commencement Day rhetoric ... Pollyannish. The fact is I'm going back to my job in the morning and it isn't going to be any different than it was when I left it on Friday or Saturday. It's going to be the same old routine. I'm going home to lunch with the same woman or man or children and they're not going to be any more or less interesting.

But mostly I'm not Beethoven or Thomas Mann or Annie Dillard and I'm certainly not Monet. I sell bonds or write contracts or wash dishes or change diapers.

Most of us live, by motivational speech standards, ordinary lives. Most of us are probably not going to be saints or martyrs or heroes. We're not going to turn out a string quartet or great painting, and the vast majority of us are not going to drop what we're doing, go to seminary and become a missionary. And so, if we are to be faithfully persistent, it will be because we have discovered new meaning and satisfaction and joy in doing what we do thoroughly, faithfully and persistently.

On September 6 an event happened that for a moment caught the attention and imagination of the whole country. It was witnessed by the President and many celebrities. The event itself was actually rather modest. A man showed up for work; Cal Ripken's job is to play shortstop for the Baltimore Orioles. He plays the game well. But he is unassuming, not very flashy, never calls much attention to himself. What Cal Ripken did, of course, was show up for work 2,131 times without ever missing, day in and day out, for 13 years. Longer than anyone else in the history of the game. He accepted prolonged applause, tipped his hat, kissed his wife and children and the next day showed up for work again. In fact, he finished the season without failing to show up for work. He was, and is, in a manner of speaking, keeping faith, showing up for work, doing what he does with persistence, faithfulness and apparently deep, almost spiritual commitment.

Is there anyone present who did not read or see *The Bridges of Madison County?* Even in sophisticated circles where it was fashionable to lampoon the book as trite, superficial, exploitive and silly, people read it. It sold almost 10 million copies. I read it, I confess. I thought it was awful. I also enjoyed it. And the reason for the phenomenal response, I think, is that the heroine of the book chooses not to leave her family, not to do something appropriately romantic like commit suicide or run away to a convent, but returns to her commitments, her life, making a home for her husband and children.

In a thoughtful review *Newsweek* reflected that our culture does wonder if life isn't more than routine, that baby boomers are on an "Experience Quest" seeking excitement, like the character in a John Fowles story, who "wanted Everest in a day, and if it took two, lost interest" [Peterson, p. 23] and that they, and all of us, quite apart from the morality of her affair with the photographer who appears on her front porch, were and are taken by the notion that her decision to stay, to reclaim her conventional life, is a good one, a moral one even, maybe even — in a way — a noble and heroic one.

Cal Ripken, the faithful at the Western Wall, the disciples of Jesus going back to their homes in Galilee, Yitzhak Rabin, people who keep faith, hold the world together.

I was intrigued by a couple I married recently (and who gave me permission to say this), a second marriage for each of them, who, when I asked about their plans and hopes and dreams said, with great integrity that the plans they had were not very flashy. They wanted routine, tradition; they were looking forward to dinner at home, cutting the grass, having friends over, and doing the same thing next Christmas as they did this Christmas ... discovering the joy and meaning that is always present in the ordinary and routine for those who keep faith.

I thought about a dear friend and mentor of mine, Arthur Romig, now in his late 80s, born in China, a Presbyterian missionary, caught up in the Second World War. A POW, then a pastor ... a faithfully persistent man who every day of his life said his prayers and lived honestly, who these past years has been caring for his wife whose Alzheimer's is progressing and who just a few months ago learned that he has Lou Gehrig's disease and still — from his bed, taking oxygen — is arranging for the ongoing care of his wife.

There are heroic, larger-than-life saints to admire and emulate and for everyone there are hundreds of ordinary saints who keep faith, who return to ordinary tasks with love and imagination and devotion and cheerfulness and great courage.

Mothers who care for needy children and who go on caring when needy children become needy young adults.

Spouses and partners who keep the faith, through thick and thin, better or worse, sickness or health.

Ministers and doctors and plumbers and bus drivers and homemakers and secretaries, men and women who go to work every day, and do what they do with freshness and creativity and utter reliability.

Ordinary saints who work hard and pay their bills and who hold the world together by their persistent faithfulness.

There is something of the basic Christian Gospel in it. Jesus of Nazareth, after all, was not a distinguished religious official. He was certainly not a political or military leader. He was, by all accounts, a common man, son of a carpenter — probably a carpenter himself, a quiet, steady teacher whose life, lived simply among his people, was full of the love and presence of God.

Our faith is that God intended that: that God chose to reveal love and grace and justice and truth in this way, in the everyday life of an ordinary man.

Karl Rahner said that we meet God — perhaps without recognizing or knowing it — when we dare to be faithful, when we keep the faith, when we love without certainty of being loved in return, when we persist in our convictions.

Not all of us can live dramatically and heroically. Not all of us can choose to respond to God's call by doing extraordinary deeds of courage. The common life is where most of us live and move and have being and where we must make sense of things; where all the meaning and joy we can hope to experience will happen and where we are called to live out our convictions and commitments in honest caring, generosity, loyalty.

So, keep the faith. Be persistent in season and out of season, in good times and not-so-good times, in deeds of heroic courage and also in deeds of quiet, persistent, faithfulness.

For God — our God — is mindful, and will be faithful, forever.